

CHAPTER

12

Political Socialization, Ideology, and Public Opinion

IN THIS CHAPTER

Summary: A **political culture** is a set of basic values and beliefs about a country or government that is shared by most citizens (freedom is precious, for example) and that influences political opinions and behaviors. The U.S. political culture gives citizens a sense of community, creates support for the democratic processes (majority rule, free elections), helps shape attitudes toward public officials, and teaches civic responsibility. The political culture provides a setting for a political system to function.

Key Terms

political culture
individualism
equality of opportunity
free enterprise
rule of law
limited government
political socialization
opinion leaders

public opinion
opinion poll
benchmark
tracking polls
entrance/exit polls
straw polls
sampling
sampling errors

ideology
political ideology
radical
liberal
moderate
conservative
reactionary

Core Political Values

Although the United States is a diverse society, it is united under a common political culture, or common set of beliefs and attitudes about government and politics. This political culture translates into a consensus of basic concepts that support democracy. Democracy is not guaranteed; therefore, the American people must continue to practice these concepts:

- **Individualism**—Individuals possess the freedom to make choices as they wish.
- **Equality of opportunity**—All people should have the same opportunities to compete and achieve.

- **Free enterprise**—Private businesses operate in competition and free of government control; capitalism.
- **Rule of law**—All people and institutions are subject to and accountable to law that is fairly applied and enforced.
- **Limited government**—Powers of government are restricted in a democracy by the will of the people and the law.

It is vital to note that the importance of each of the above changes over time. During the presidency of George W. Bush (2001–2009), some believed that, because of the “War on Terror,” the power of the government should be greatly expanded. During the first two years of the Obama presidency, members of the “Tea Party” and others claimed that the powers of the federal government had gotten too big.

Political Socialization

Political socialization is the process by which citizens acquire a sense of political identity. Socialization is a complex process that begins early in childhood and continues throughout a person’s life. It allows citizens to become aware of politics, learn political facts, and form political values and opinions. Lower trade barriers and advances in communications technology have created an interconnected world economy and culture. Globalization has influenced American politics by increasing the degree to which the United States influences, and is influenced by, the ideals and values of other nations. Although the paths to political awareness, knowledge, and values differ, people are exposed to a combination of influences that shape their political identities and opinions:



- Family and home influences often help shape political party identification. It is strongest when both parents identify with the same political party.
- Schools teach patriotism, basic governmental functions and structure, and encourage political participation.
- Group affiliations (interest groups, labor unions, professional organizations) provide common bonds between people which may be expressed through the group or its activities.
- Demographic factors (occupation, race, gender, age, religion, region of country, income, education, and ethnicity).
- Mass media inform the public about issues and help set the political and public agendas.
- **Opinion leaders**, those individuals held in great respect because of their position, expertise, or personality, may informally and unintentionally exercise influence.
- Events may instill positive or negative attitudes. For example, the Watergate scandal created a mistrust of government. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, patriotic spirit increased in many parts of the United States.

Public Opinion

Public opinion is a collection of shared attitudes of many different people in matters relating to politics, public issues, or the making of public policy. It is shaped by people’s political culture and political socialization. An **opinion poll** is an assessment of public opinion by the questioning of a representative sample of the population. **Benchmark** or **tracking polls** are taken as a way to determine who is ahead or behind in an election. **Entrance and exit polls** are often taken at polling places before or after voters cast their ballots. Public opinion can

be analyzed according to distribution (physical shape of responses when graphed), intensity (how strongly the opinions are held), and stability (how much the opinion changes over time). A consensus occurs when there is general agreement on an issue. Public opinion that is strongly divided between two very different views is a divisive opinion.

Measuring Public Opinion

The measurement of public opinion is a complex process often conveying unreliable results. Sampling error is an unavoidable error in statistical analysis of the data caused by choosing a sample that does not reflect the entire population (random sampling does not guarantee a perfect sample). Elections, interest groups, the media, and personal contacts may signal public opinion on certain issues; however, the most reliable measure of public opinion is the public opinion poll. Businesses, governments, political candidates, and interest groups use polls. Some polls are mass survey polls, which will survey a large group of people, while other polls are based on a focus group, a small group from the larger population that is questioned together about issues.

Early polling in the United States involved the use of **straw polls**, asking the same question of a large number of people. They were unreliable because they did not necessarily include a cross-section of the general population of the United States. The most famous mishap occurred in 1936 when the *Literary Digest* mailed postcards to more than 10 million people concerning the outcome of the 1936 presidential election. With over 2 million responses, the magazine incorrectly predicted the defeat of Franklin Roosevelt and the victory of challenger Alf Landon. The magazine had used automobile registrations and telephone directories to develop its sample, not realizing that during the Depression many people did not have cars or telephones. Many voters who supported Roosevelt had not been polled. The mailings had also been done early, and some voters changed their minds between answering the poll and actually voting.

Modern polling began in the 1930s when George Gallup helped develop the use of a scientific polling process that includes:

- **sampling**—Those chosen to participate in the poll must be representative of the general population and chosen at random.
- **preparing valid questions**—Directions should be clear and questions should be phrased and ordered in a way that does not lead the respondent to a particular answer (clear, fair, and unbiased).
- **controlling how the poll is taken**—Make sure the respondent has some knowledge of the issues addressed in the poll and that the pollster's appearance and tone do not influence the responses. Survey methods may include telephone, mail, and in-person interviews.
- **analyzing and reporting results**—Reporting the results of polls without providing information about how the poll was conducted, **sampling errors**, or when the poll that was taken can lead to misinformation and error.

In a given election, the reliability of data obtained in a public opinion poll impacts elections and policy debates. Today, the use of statistical analysis through computers has made polling an even more accurate research tool.

Ideology

An **ideology** is a consistent set of beliefs. A **political ideology** is a set of beliefs about politics and public policy that creates the structure for looking at government and public policy. Political ideologies can change over time. Differences in ideology generally occur in the arena of political, economic, and social issues.

KEY IDEA

Ideology: A Political Spectrum

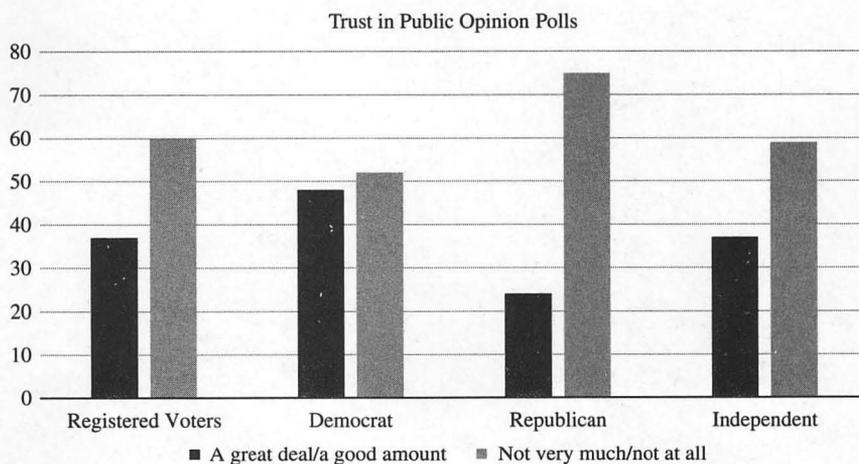
- **radical**—Favors rapid, fundamental change in existing social, economic, or political order; may be willing to resort to extreme means, even violence or revolution to accomplish such change (extreme change to create an entirely new social system).
- **liberal**—Supports active government in promoting individual welfare and supporting civil rights, and accepts peaceful political and social change within the existing political system. The Democratic Party tends to be more aligned with the liberal ideology.
- **moderate**—Political ideology that falls between liberal and conservative and which may include some of both; usually thought of as tolerant of others' political opinions and not likely to hold extreme views on issues.
- **conservative**—Promotes a limited governmental role in helping individuals economically, supports traditional values and lifestyles, favors a more active role for government in promoting national security, and approaches change cautiously. The Republican Party tends to be more aligned with the conservative ideology.
- **reactionary**—Advocates a return to a previous state of affairs, often a social order or government that existed earlier in history (may be willing to go to extremes to achieve their goals).

Review Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

- Which of the following is NOT a concept found in the political culture of the American democratic society?
 - private property
 - equality
 - majority rule
 - minority rule
- The process by which citizens acquire a sense of their own political identity would best be defined as
 - public opinion
 - political socialization
 - demographics
 - political culture
- Which of the following would be a true statement regarding public opinion?
 - Public opinion teaches patriotism.
 - Public opinion allows citizens to become aware of politics, learn facts, and form political values.
 - Public opinion is shaped by an individual's political culture and political socialization.
 - A change in public opinion is always a slow process.
- Attempting to measure public opinion by asking the same question of a large number of people is
 - a straw poll
 - a sampling poll
 - a controlling poll
 - a scientific poll
- There are many different ideologies within the political spectrum. An ideology that promotes a limited governmental role in helping individuals and supports traditional values and lifestyles would best be defined as a
 - liberal ideology
 - reactionary ideology
 - conservative ideology
 - moderate ideology

Use the graph to answer the question 6.



6. Which of the following statements is reflected in the data in the graph above?
- (A) Republicans have a greater trust in public opinion polls than Democrats.
 - (B) Independents have less trust in public opinion polls than Republicans.
 - (C) Democrats have less trust in public opinion polls than Republicans.
 - (D) Republicans have more trust in public opinion polls than registered voters.

Free-Response Question

7. Political culture is a set of basic values and beliefs about a country or government shared by most citizens. This political culture translates into a consensus about democracy.
- (A) Define political socialization.
 - (B) Describe two factors that shape political socialization.
 - (C) Explain how each factor identified in Part B affects political socialization.



› Answers and Explanations

1. **D.** Majority rule/minority rights is a concept found in U.S. political culture. The other answer choices reflect ideals of U.S. democratic society.
2. **B.** Political socialization is the process of acquiring a political identity. Public opinion (A) is a collection of shared attitudes of many different people. Demographics (C) is a factor that shapes political socialization. Political culture (D) is a set of basic values and beliefs about a country or government that is shared by most citizens.
3. **C.** Public opinion is shaped by an individual's political culture and political socialization. Institutions such as the family and schools teach patriotism (A). Public opinion is shaped by facts and political values (B). Change may be slow or sudden and may be analyzed (D).
4. **A.** A straw poll is an attempt to measure public opinion by asking the same question of a large number of people. Sampling (B) and controlling (C) are features of scientific polling (D).
5. **C.** A conservative ideology promotes a limited governmental role in helping individuals and supports traditional values and lifestyles. Liberal ideology (A) supports active government involvement. Reactionary ideology (B) desires a return to an earlier social order or government. Moderate ideology (D) falls between liberal and conservative on the political spectrum.
6. **C.** Republicans have less trust in public opinion polls than do Democrats (A). Independents have more trust in public opinion polls than do Republicans (B). Republicans have less trust in public opinion polls than do registered voters.
7. **(A)** Political socialization is the process by which citizens acquire a sense of political identity. It allows citizens to become aware of politics, learn political facts, and form political values and opinions.
(B) Factors that shape political socialization include family and home influences (parents or other relatives that live with you); schools and educational experiences (teachers and school experiences); group affiliations (interest groups, labor unions, professional organizations); demographic factors (occupation, gender, race, age, religion, etc.); and mass media (radio, television, internet, newspapers, magazines, blogs).
(C) Family and home influences occur when parents talk about politics, or there exists a family tradition of political identification. Schools and educational experiences introduce students to elections and voting, ordered society, or students may enroll in a class in civics or government. Group affiliations such as interest groups, labor unions, or professional organizations help people form a common bond and may encourage a certain ideology. Demographic factors (occupation, gender, race, age, religion, etc.) may influence where and how you live, which could influence your political thoughts. Mass media provides political information and influences political ideas.

> Rapid Review

- A political culture is a set of basic values and beliefs about a country or government that are shared by most citizens.
- America is a heterogeneous (diverse) society with many political cultures.
- Democracy is not guaranteed. In order to ensure democracy, political concepts must be practiced.
- Political socialization is the process of citizens acquiring a political identity. Several factors influence the process of political socialization.
- Public opinion is a collection of ideas and attitudes about government that are shared by the general public.
- Public opinion is shaped by an individual's political culture and political socialization.
- Public opinion polls are the most reliable measure of public opinion.
- Modern polling began in the 1930s with George Gallup. Today, polling is more scientific and based on statistical analysis.
- An ideology is a consistent set of beliefs. A political ideology is beliefs based on politics and public policy.
- Ideological placement on a political spectrum may include classification as radical, liberal, moderate, conservative, or reactionary.